

ASSESSING INTERNATIONAL POST-GRADUATE STUDENTS' SATISFACTION TOWARDS THE UKM EDUCATION SERVICE: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH STUDY IN THE ASPECT OF THE COST-BENEFIT APPROACH

Shareef Alzaid¹

Abstract

Tuition fee in educational institution plays an important role in determining students' satisfaction toward education quality. Studies find out that imposing greater tuition fee without simultaneously improving educational quality would cause fall in students' number. In UKM, graduate students have different perceptions about the satisfaction of the program joining in the light of the cost/benefit approach. Some students perceive the service as satisfying and believe that the education programs are surpassing other programs in other universities. However, some student think program is similar to others and cannot notify a difference. By using semi-structured interviews, we seek to uncover information from post-graduate students, explore their attitude and their point of view relating the cost they are paying as tuition and fees for the university. The qualitative research methodology had helped us to uncover knowledge that cannot be grasped by other methods. The findings show that International students are satisfied with the tuition fees as long as they are equal or less than other top universities the host country. However, students are unsatisfied when the Infrastructure and educational facilities in the university and claim they are imperfect compared to other leading universities in the country.

Keywords: Qualitative Method, education, cost-benefit approach

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Introduction

Tuition fee in educational institution plays an important role in determining students' satisfaction toward education quality (Jongbloed, 2005). Studies have found that imposing greater tuition fee without simultaneously improving educational quality would cause fall in student's number (Moore, 1989; Cameron & Heckman, 1999). In several cases, educational institutions do actually use greater tuition fee to improve their education quality by providing more benefit to students, e.g. more books in the library, more advanced computer software, etc. Thus, there is positive relation between the levels of tuition fee with the quality perceived by the students (Jongbloed, 2005). By this perception, students are willing to pay higher tuition fee only if that accompanied by higher quality of education (McDuff, 2007) and that the relationship between quality and students application is positively significant (Soo & Elliott, 2010). In fact, Elmes

¹ PhD candidate in Finance and Investment at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi. Email: jouby2002@yahoo.com

(2015) found out in a survey that nearly three-quarters of prospective and current students would be willing to pay higher fees if it guaranteed them a graduate-level job upon degree completion,

Despite, the causality of education quality and tuition fee, we find the need to explore more on education quality in the perception of students. In education body service, graduate students have different perceptions about the satisfaction of the program joining in the light of the cost/benefit approach. Some students perceive the service as satisfying and believe that the education programs are surpassing other programs in other universities. However, some student think program is similar to others and can't notify a difference. This has motivated us to investigate the perception of graduate students toward education quality in UKM when comparing it to other top Malaysian public universities. The analysis in this study is to seek to what extent does cost and benefit construct comprehended in the graduate students attitude and satisfaction.

Respondents of this study comprise of 30 graduate students (international) in UKM, which we believe is the saturated number of respondent. We develop theoretical assumption and concept by using grounded theory, in which we dig deeply in the empirical observation and data that have been gathered. We collect information from the respondents through confidential semi-structured interview. Based on the content analysis, we find that students do use cost and benefit analysis in perceiving UKM. This study also finds that non-educational related variable is actually also under consideration of students in perceiving UKM education quality.

Finally, this paper will be organized into five parts. The first part is the literature review of previous studies and literature gap found to contribute to the knowledge. The second is the data and methodological part that explains the research questions, the objectives, and the method to answer the research questions. The third section is findings and analysis that explains the interview result and discuss the findings. And finally, the fourth part is conclusion and implication of the study that also provides recommendation for further study.

Problem Statement

In the light of the cost and benefit theory, people evaluate their satisfaction of a product/service they accomplish by comparing the costs they burden (not in just financially) to the benefit they attain. Thus, if the benefits outweigh the costs spent on the product/service acquired, then the product/service would receive their satisfaction and appreciation. Moreover, they will be willing to peruse and continue in transacting this product/service and encourage others to so. However, not all costs can be detected by every consumer to since some services are costless and they are subjected to the consumer own mental of constructions. Some services are vital and in need to some consumers while for others they feel that they are unnecessary. The satisfaction of costumers to a service delivered is not straight forward when the costless and they have different mechanism and construction about the service delivered.

In UKM, as education body service, graduate students have different perceptions about the satisfaction of the program joining in the light of the cost/benefit approach. Some students perceive the service as satisfying and believe that the education programs are surpassing other programs in other universities. However, some student think program is similar to others and can't notify a difference.

Objective

Our objective is to investigate the attitude and satisfaction of graduate students about the service delivered by UKM. We intend to assess the extent to how the graduate students perceive the quality of the program and their evaluation when comparing it to other universities programs. We seek to see how much the cost/benefit theory constructed comprehended in their attitude and satisfaction.

Research Questions

How do graduate students in UKM perceive the graduate program as whole?

How do they evaluate it from other Universities' programs?

Do they think the benefit outweigh the costs of the program?

Are they willing to continue and proceed again for higher level after graduation?

How do they think about their career will it be enhanced of receiving the degree from UKM?

Do they think they will find a better job after graduation?

Review of Literature

Alike any organization with its costumers, every educational institution is keen to attain its student's satisfaction. When we speak about satisfaction the following constructs come up to our minds: attraction, pride, or positive feeling toward the program or institution that the students develop (Danielson, 1998). Therefore, it becomes essential for an educational institution to build a system that determine the satisfaction and expectations of its customers, and to take consider these points into when and while making educational plans , (Baykal and Sahin, 1999). Deming, an American statistician and founder of total quality management, wrote that an university which achieving success is the one that continuously improving and developing its capacity to fulfill the needs of its students and educational staff, (Yoshida, 1994). On the other hand, Joseph added that for a university to ought to implement a more customer friendly approach with the aim of retaining students for postgraduate study as evidence shows that the recruitment of students is several times more expensive than their retention (Joseph et al., 2005).

Many researchers think that imposing a high tuition fees not combined with high quality education system can lead to students' insatisfaction. Moore and Williams (1989) made an empirical research on the UK government's new rule in 1980 permitting UK universities to charge both undergraduate and postgraduate students from outside of the EU (referred to as overseas students) tuition fees reflecting what is recognized as the full cost of provision. However, this fee increase unsurprisingly caused many oversea students to reconsider their choice in studying in the UK and moving to another destination, ([Moore and, 1989). Cameron and Heckman (1999 in their study come up with a result declaring that there was a fall of population of students up to 4-6% corresponding to a strategy of \$1000 increase in tuition fees, (Cameron and Heckman, 1999). Therefore, When assessing costs and benefits of investing in human capital, fees were occuppies a

enormous capacity, (Jongbloed, 2005). Nevertheless, the theme of claiming students to pay fees has been highlighted by theoretical modeling that interpreted the significance of quasi-price in the higher education industry, (Jongbloed, 2005). It had been proven that government policies of charging students tuition fees had added benefit on quality of higher education, (Jongbloed, 2005). Correa emphasized on the advantages of imposing optimal fees on students in higher education is that graduated alumni can receive extra incomes that never gained if not tuition fees were imposed, (Correa, 1998). Moreover, Main outcomes of studies showed that students were willing to pay quite higher fees if that accompanied with higher quality of education, (McDuff, 2007). In fact, the relationship between quality and students applications was positively significant, (Soo and Elliott, 2010). In this multitude of perception and opinions, assessment of the service quality that the student receives may earn his focus. The definition service quality in higher education as “the difference between what a student expects to receive and his/her perceptions of actual delivery, (O'Neill and Palmer, 2004).

Scigliano wrote the history of cost and benefit analysis and he tracked it to 1844 where French engineer and author, Arsene Juvenal wrote an article which is a proposal regarding cost and benefit, (Scigliano, 2002). However, the break through convention of cost and benefit concept could derived to the initiation of the American River and Harbor Act of 1902, where a cost and benefit concept rule related to the environment sustainability, (Hough, 1993). During the 1930s, the U.S. Corps of Engineers relied upon cost and benefit analysis as a criteria to justify civil engineering projects in the USA, (Wikipedia). Dinwiddy (1996) state that the cost and benefit analysis's purpose is to recognize both tangible and intangible costs and compare them with the actual or realized benefits. Kaplan (2014) emphasizes on the long-term effects:

The best cost-benefit analyses take a broad view of costs and benefits, including indirect and longer-term effects, reflecting the interests of all stakeholders who will be affected by the programme. It is thus important to ensure the analysis is as comprehensive as possible.

Meanwhile, Schmidt (2016) speaks about the uncertainty of how to measure costs and benefits in financial terms:

Many people are uncertain about how to measure or value contributions to business objectives defined first in non-financial terms, such as changes in key performance indicators for customer satisfaction, risk, branding, or quality of service delivery.

In contrary, However, not all researchers rely on the cost and benefit analysis, Adrienne Pricee thinks that the usage of CBA to measure benefits that are not financially sensible is difficult and improper, (Price, 2001).

Data& Methodology

In the light of the grounded theory, we intend to develop a theoretical assumption and concept of this phenomenon by digging deeply in the empirical observation and data we are gathering. Our research method was to gather information from confidential semi-structured interviews with post-graduate students of corporate those are currently studying at UKM, the National University of

Malaysia. Our sample scope will be a diversification of students (international, major, gender and age) who are still studying in the UKM.

We will be seeking to uncover information from post-graduate students through semi-structured interviews and explore their attitude and point of view relating the cost they are paying as tuition and fees for the university. The qualitative research interview seeks to describe and the meanings of central themes in the life world of the subjects. The main task in interviewing is to understand the meaning of what the interviewees say, (Kvale, 1996). Indeed, not all knowledge can be detected and realized directly through word of mouth, there things that need to be interpreted and analyzed. Interviews are particularly useful for getting the story behind a participant's experiences. A qualitative research interview seeks to cover both a factual and a meaning level, though it is usually more difficult to interview on a meaning level, (Kvale, 1996). The interviewer can pursue in-depth information around the topic. Interviews may be useful as follow-up to certain respondents to questionnaires, e.g., to further investigate their responses, (McNamara, 1999). In fact, no better methods in deriving a hidden data than confronting the relative individual face to face and recording his answers. However, the interviewer ought to have interpersonal skills and efficient communication tools that are able to pull the relevant and required data that supports the exploration paper. Interpersonal skills can be defined broadly as "those skills which one needs in order to communicate effectively with another person or a group of people" (Rungapadiachy, 1999). He need to be talent listener as same as speaker. The ability to listen effectively is a core skill in a range of interpersonal situations (Bostrom, 1997). Also, the interviewer ought to be aware of the vitality of questions that invokes interviewee's compliance and fulfillment. The ability to use questions that maximize the amount of relevant (relative to irrelevant) information that is gathered in an exchange, serves to enhance the communicative efficiency of the interaction (Hayes, 2002). Nevertheless, the interviewer has to prepare himself before conducting the interview by applying different techniques or rules of thumb that guarantees his success along the interview procedure, (Post, 2016).

Finally, Kvale, a known figure in the qualitative research methodology, gave recommendations for interviewers that emphasize the importance of advance preparation and interviewer competence. There are however standard choices of methods to be made at the different stages of an interview investigation. These are presented through the seven stages of an interview investigation:

1. **Thematizing:** Formulate the purpose of the investigation and describe the concept of the topic to be investigated before the interviews start.
2. **Designing:** Plan the design of the study, taking into consideration all seven stages, before the interview starts.
3. **Interviewing:** Conduct the interviews based on an interview guide and with a reflective approach to the knowledge sought
4. **Transcribing:** Prepare the interview material for analysis, which commonly includes a transcription from oral speech to written text.
5. **Analyzing:** Decide, on the basis of the purpose and topic of the investigation, and on the nature of the interview material, which methods of analysis are appropriate.

6. Verifying: Ascertain the generalizability, reliability, and validity of the interview findings. Reliability refers to how consistent the results are, and validity means whether an interview study investigates what is intended to be investigated.

7. Reporting: Communicate the findings of the study and the methods applied in a form that lives up to scientific criteria, takes the ethical aspects of the investigation into, (Kvale, 1996).

Findings and Analysis

From the interviews and data we gathered we can be capable of reducing them into five key themes. After setting the themes, we followed up with quotations of the respondents' comments of their motivation regarding resorting Islamic debt. The themes we organized are as follows: (1); (2); (3); (4); and (5);

Key Themes

Theme 1: International students are satisfied with the tuition fees as long as they are equal or less than other top universities the host country.

When we asked the students during the interview about their attitude regarding the tuition fees in UKM, most considered the costs as normal compare to top universities in Malaysia. They expressed their acceptance to fees costs and added up that they are not much annoyed of fees as they annoyed of costs related to transportation, accommodation and medication.

Tuition fee in UKM is more or less the same as in other top universities in Malaysia.

One of the students declared:

“I do my PhD in UKM but took my master in other top Malaysian public universities. I found that tuition fee in UKM compared to my previous university for the same program is more or less similar. The differences I found are in non education related costs, such as medical cost, transportation cost, etc. Take for example in comparison with my previous university, medical cost in UKM is slightly lower but transportation cost is slightly higher”.

Other student stated:

One participant's comments:

“I made a comparison of tuition prices before I came here at UKM, and found that UKM's tuition fees costs are at average compared to other universities. Other cost worries me, i.e. the campus, transportation and the costs of my travel two trip when I go to my country in holidays.”

Tuition fee in UKM is cheaper compared to other top universities in home country.

“I cannot compare tuition fee in UKM to other top Malaysian universities, because I do not have direct experience in other top Malaysian universities. But compare to other top universities in Indonesia, tuition fee in UKM is indeed much lower. I give an example for PhD in Economic; the tuition fee in two top universities in Indonesia on average is doubled, or even tripled, the tuition fee in UKM.”

Indeed costs play role in determining the direction of students when enrolling in a university. Many studies showed that the relationship between student enrollment and the cost fees are inversely. In late nineties a survey study performed in the USA showed that the increase of fees had affected the students enrolment in certain university negatively. The study concluded that any \$1000 increase encountered by 2.5% decrease of students demand, Cameron & Heckman (1999). Likewise, in 2008 a similar survey research conducted in UK and claimed that any \$1000 increase in tuition fees can lower the number of students by 5%, (Soo and Elliott, 2010).

Theme 2 the popularity and reputation of the university enhances students satisfaction even if tuition fees were to be higher.

Our participants claimed that the reputation of the UKM in the region is outstanding and cheerful. They admitted that the main reason to enroll in the university was the issue of its magnificent image. They see UKM as a university that has astonishing lectures and research-oriented programs. Most of the participants believed that when comparing the good academic status and brilliant image with costs paid the former outweigh the later.

UKM and home university have MOU (memorandum of understanding) in promoting education and research.

One student claimed:

“I actually choose UKM because my home university has MOU with UKM (although my home university did not oblige me to go to UKM) and I found that the tuition fee in UKM is more or less the same with other top Malaysian public universities. Suppose I found other top Malaysian public universities that has lower tuition fee than UKM, I would probably were in that university now”.

One student

For certain faculty, UKM is regarded the best in research and teaching among other top Malaysia universities.

Other student responded:

“I choose UKM because I know that UKM is the best in research and teaching in the field of Mathematics. That is why I did my master in UKM and continue my PhD in here too.”

One other student replied:

Non education related matters, such as language and pride.

Third student commented:

“To tell the truth I decided to study in Malaysia because Malaysian culture and language are the same to mine. Beside that, if I studied in Malaysia, people in my home country still regarded me as a product of overseas education, which bring pride to me and my family. I actually did not care in which university I suppose to study. As long as in respectable university, for me is fine.”

Postgraduate Students search for popular colleges to enhance their prospect career or their academic knowledge. Soo and Elliott (2010) found that the popularity of the university plays main

role on the students decision when enrolling in an university at UK. There are many students who focus their intention on universities that is known by the public as reputed and prestige. Veloutsou et al, (2005) and Herrero et al. (2015) argued that image and prestige are identified the international students' first choice in their destination.

Theme 3: students are unsatisfied when the Infrastructure and educational facilities in the university is imperfect compared to other universities in the country.

Most participants claimed that infrastructure, facilities and the public transportation were unsatisfactory. Although the participants expressed their appreciation on many subjects in UKM, their opinion about infrastructure was disappointing. They claimed that the buildings were old and the facilities were poor and less than their expectations. However, the thing that disappointed them most was the transportation service.

Infrastructure and educational facilities are more or less the same as in other top Malaysian universities.

One student argued:

“I know from my friends that infrastructure and educational facilities in UKM are similar when compared to other top Malaysian public universities. I also had visited several times to other top universities and I found that infrastructure and educational facilities in UKM are similar. However, I noticed that most of the buildings in UKM look relatively older than in other top universities.”

Public transportation is getting worse, in term of frequency.

Second student quoted:

“Based on what I experienced, public transportation in UKM, I think is getting worse. Say for example three years ago, every ten minutes I could get a bus that took me outside UKM. But nowadays, it takes around 30 minutes (I even once had to wait for an hour) to get a bus at the same station.”

Students prefer that the university they are studying in earns the best infrastructure and facilities that could support the learning process. Tormovick et al. (1996) showed in their study about foreign students satisfaction in the US universities that physical facilities (tangible) as the most vital element in assessing their satisfaction of service quality. Also, Townley (2001) in his qualitative research paper in UK found that students are mostly concerned about computer facilities, , transportation, accommodation and food. Student's construct a social account about the services and facilities they deal with. Students as costumers expect the service quality as similar or more than outstanding rivals. Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1990) also concluded that consumer perceptions of service quality result from comparing expectations prior to receiving the service, and their actual experience of the service.

Theme 4: Student are satisfied when the quality of lecturers in their university are high compared to other top universities in the host country.

Participants argued that the quality and the outstanding reputation of UKM's lecturers in Malaysia and the region had played a role in their decision of joining UKM. They didn't seem to mind the costs they are offered as long they are enjoying high quality of career staff. On the other hand, there is who expressed their unsatisfactory with their cases related to supervision. Although most students believe the lecturer were qualified notably, they assign their disappointment about the delay the face when the lecturers review their thesis. In fact, there are some who claimed that inadequate postpone by supervisors to their work have delayed their degree approval for about two years.

In term of teaching, the quality of lecturer in UKM is the same as in other top Malaysian public universities.

One student commented:

“I have many friends from home country who study in Malaysia too. I sometimes attend my friends' class of the same field. I found that the mastery level of the lecturer to the material presented in other top universities is more or less the same as in UKM. I also noticed that some lecturers in UKM are highly respected and often invited to give lecture outside UKM, but the same thing also in UKM, inviting lecturers from other universities. So my point is as I mentioned before, that the quality of lecturer in UKM, I think is the same.”

Most supervisors do not dedicated in supervising the student, which affect student's length of study

Other student said:

“I have spent around six years to complete my PhD thesis before viva. It is not because I am too lazy to do my thesis, but because my supervisor took quite long time just to review my work. Once I had to wait for six months just to get a review from my supervisor. Suppose my supervisor could review my work in due time, then I would probably had finished my thesis in four years. I guess my supervisor concentrated more on his research project, so he probably did not have much time to review my thesis. Moreover, I did try to discuss this matter to the dean, and she said that she would settle the thing, but up to now I still feel no improvement on this matter”.

Most students argued that the qualification figure regarding faculty's lecturers played an important role in deciding to apply in the university. Hansen et al. (2000) and Ahmad (2014) found the quality of lecturers plays great role in achieving the quality of the service delivered and hence attaining student's satisfaction. Pozo-Munoz et al. (2000), Vos et al. (2007) and Martin (2013) concluded that the teaching staff enacts a primarily role in universes process, thus, their behavior and attitude are determinants of the students satisfaction.

However, more students showed their unsatisfactory about the lecturers supervision during thesis execution. The supervision duration plays a critical role in achieving students satisfactory or unsatisfactory of the quality of the program delivered. (Harman 2002) discussed that a prime factor in achieving students' dissatisfaction with course is a poor supervision. Harman (2002) again showed in his paper about international students in Australia that both international and Australian students complained of difficulty in getting access to busy supervisors who often

had a dozen or more research students and were actively involved with externally funded research projects.

Theme 5: international postgraduate students are satisfied when their prospect career is promising.

Most students who we interviewed recognized the crucial role that the prospect career plays in determining their enrolment and therefore haven't regret what they sacrificed or paid for. Many participants believe that their prospect career will enhance after their graduation and receiving the degree from the university. However, some students added another benefit by the sociality with multi-national students could strengthened their networking that is capable of supporting their prospect career.

Improve accreditation point to home institution and job rank.

One student argued:

“Well, my expectation to just to help to improve accreditation point for my home university, because I am a lecturer in my home university. By gaining PhD from overseas, this will much help improve my home university accreditation point. As usual this accreditation thing is to help my home university more recognizable to prospective students. Besides that, for sure after I get my PhD, my job rank will also improve which in turn improve my salary as well.”

Establish a good networking with alumnae from other countries beside Malaysian.

Second student claimed:

“I am expecting to have a good networking among alumnae after I graduated. This will help me to find business opportunity overseas. In UKM, my other-country friends are not only Malaysian but people from Middle East as well. For example, during my study I manage to make business with my friend from Middle East. So I am very keen to establish a good relationship with my colleague in UKM”.

Most of the students expressed their confidence of obtaining a better career opportunity in the future. Career prospect is a main factor that enhances student's satisfactions and enrolment in a university even though a tuition fees are above average. Harman (2003) founded in his survey regarding student's expectation after graduating from Australian universities that 78% of international students are optimistic about their prospect career while for local students 67% felt optimistic. Students by no doubt will reconsider the university that doesn't fill their ambition of good career. Rolfe (2002) and Huang (2013) commented that students may increasingly regard their university education as 'instrumental' as they enter higher education mainly for career reasons.

.Suggestions for Future Research

In this research paper we have tried to give answers and uncover the phenomena of the of international postgraduate students' satisfaction in their university. The nature of qualitative research methods is designed to enable researchers to study social and cultural phenomena.

Inevitably, Qualitative methodology are better fitting to understand individuals, people and entities' motivation and attitudes about a certain concept or or situation. However, what needed next is a more study using the quantitative methodology. Natural science and econometric modeling may be appropriate when the phenomenon or the issue is coherent and the systemic is comprehended.

Limitation

Due to the nature of the study and the limitation of time and capabilities at this particular time, the paper do confronts restrictions for a number of reasons and circumstances. First, time schedule, we were assigned to finish the project in few weeks after the proposal had been checked approved to move forward with the work. In fact, the most time constraining is the appointment posted by the respondents. Since our respondents are postgraduate their responsibilities are intensive and attaining interview from them in few weeks time was challenging and sometimes impossible. Second, although this our first qualitative research paper during our postgraduate study, we tried to overcome the challenges we confronted and though we are recognizing our weakness in some skills. Also, the distribution of nationalities, gender and age wasn't reasonable to avoid any bias and achieve balanced point of views. However, this was because most students we appointed were unavailable.

Conclusion

The international students we interviewed have showed that the conscious of the cost-benefit concept and adopt it in the aim of reaching satisfaction or not about the education service in UKM. The international students make a comparison between what they pay and the gain to make judgments as either winners or losers. However, not all services provided can be valued there are things that are priceless and beyond financial value, like knowledge. The students at overall expressed their satisfaction though they gave conservation about some services they found unsatisfying.

In speaking about tuition fees, most participants are satisfied about the costs and compared similar to other top universities in Malaysia. Also, others are convinced that the fees in the top local universities of their origin country are sometimes higher. Students see the university as outstanding and receive remarkable popularity in the country and in the region. Also, there are many students who expressed their appreciation about the lecturers in the university and recognized their qualification and competitiveness. However, there are who claimed that the supervision of lecturers is dissatisfying. Some complained that the imperfect supervision of postponing their thesis review led to delay of students' approval and hopefully receiving their degree. Finally, international students feel optimistic about their prospect career after graduation and expecting better job and life. There are who think that the sociality with other foreign students in campus could open for them a prospect career and an opportunity.

To sum up, the qualitative research methodology has helped us to uncover knowledge that cannot be grasped by other methods i.e., statistics. The attitude knowledge that is inherent in students requires a methodology that is capable of emerging deeply in the issue and give adequate understanding and description. The interviews were successful in pulling the data needed to build synthesizing and thus the right generalization. The qualitative method requires a researcher to be first patient and then good in communication skills. It requires the researcher to be exclusive in delivering his questions, and has a quick acuity and apprehension to grasp the sufficient data. Qualitative research is sufficient to

investigate attitude, experience and behavior by methods that imply deep and internal observation. The researcher who uses a qualitative method has to take his time and iterate his route and questions in favor of enhancing his data grasping and assuring its reliability or validity.

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